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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001896

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: TAMIL MP ASSASSINATED IN COLOMBO;
THOUSANDS PROTEST

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The assassination of a Tamil Member of Parliament in broad daylight in Colombo on November 10 provoked widespread outrage and condemnation. President Rajapaksa issued a forthright statement in which he mourned the death of Nadaraja Raviraj, whom he called a friend, and ordered an aggressive investigation to find and punish the killers. But the brazen murder provoked outrage from Tamil and human rights groups who held the government responsible. Although a previously unknown group claimed credit for the deed, the most likely authors are cadres of the LTTE split-off "Karuna group." Following closely on two incidents in which government military actions led to the death of Tamil civilians, the incident further raises the ante in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict. Many fear that the Tamil Tigers will retaliate by targeting Sinhalese civilians in Sri Lanka's south. Embassy Colombo issued a statement deploring the assassination and calling on the GSL to launch an immediate investigation. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Unidentified gunmen shot dead Tamil Member of Parliament and former Mayor of Jaffna Nadaraja Raviraj November 10 near his home in Colombo. His bodyguard was also killed. Two assassins on a motorbike shot Raviraj and his bodyguard within his SUV in front of a military barracks in broad, rush hour daylight. Despite the ensuing traffic jam, the assailants managed a clean escape.

¶3. (U) Raviraj represented the Jaffna district in Parliament for the pro-Tamil Tiger (LTTE) Tamil National Alliance (TNA). He was an outspoken human rights activist. Though he supported the LTTE's political goals, Raviraj had criticized the Tiger leadership for recruiting child soldiers while their children attend school abroad.

¶4. (U) Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa immediately condemned the assassination of Raviraj, whom he called a friend, in the strongest terms. He also termed the killing "a deliberate attempt to bring the Government into disrepute." He also asked the UK to provide help from Scotland Yard for the investigation.

¶5. (SBU) The authors of the crime went to no great lengths to cover their tracks. A previously unknown group claimed responsibility. However, they posted a lengthy explanation of why Raviraj had to die on a website maintained by the anti-LTTE "Karuna group." The diatribe stated that TNA politicians had no right to live in Colombo under the protection of the Sri Lankan government while their ideological brethren, the LTTE, made war against the same government.

¶6. (C) Even without British help, the government arrested eight suspects in this case within forty-eight hours by launching a dragnet of Tamil neighborhoods where Karuna cadres would likely try to hide. As of this writing, the roundup was continuing, with reports of more arrests.

¶7. (SBU) However, the government has little credibility left regarding its protection of the human and civil rights of Sri Lanka's Tamils. Three days before Raviraj's murder, the University Teachers for Human Rights (UTHR) released a statement contending that the Sri Lanka military command structure is dysfunctional and that some soldiers no longer answer to their superiors but act as "mobile killer units targeting Tamils." (Note: Another TNA parliamentarian, Joseph Pararajasingham, was shot and killed by unidentified gunmen in Batticaloa on Christmas Eve 2005.) TNA leader R. Sampanthan was articulating the feelings of the Tamil masses when he told Reuters November 10: "It is government forces or forces aligned with the government. This is an attempt to stifle and silence those who can justifiably espouse the Tamil cause."

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¶8. (C) United National Party leader (and leader of the opposition) Ranil Wickremesinghe called Ambassador within hours of the assassination. Wickremesinghe said he was deeply disturbed by the killing, particularly since Raviraj was a fluent Sinhala speaker who had made a point of reaching out to the Sinhalese majority. Wickremesinghe implied it was Raviraj's outspokenness in the cause of moderation that had made him a target. In a public statement, the opposition leader called Raviraj a friend and a "visionary leader" who "advocated for both sides to engage in serious negotiations to find a lasting solution."

¶9. (U) The National Anti-War Front (NAWF), led by Foundation for Co-Existence Director Dr. Kumar Rupasinghe, organized a demonstration march "for the right to live" on November 13. Raviraj's body was to be carried from the funeral home to the Town Hall for public viewing. The Center for Policy Alternatives, the National Peace Council and other think tanks and NGOs participated. Representatives from most of Sri Lanka's political parties, including the opposition United National Party (UNP), Tamil parties (excluding the Eelam People's Democratic Party -- EPDP -- and Karuna's Tamil Makkal Vidutalai Pulikkal -- TMVP), the Communist Party and other leftist parties, and Muslim parties including Rauf Hakeem's Sri Lanka Muslim Congress and Housing and Development Minister Feriyal Ashiraf's National Unity Alliance (NUA) attended. Most Tamil and Muslim shops in Colombo closed today in support of a general strike ("hartal") called by the demonstration's organizers.

¶10. (U) Text of the Embassy statement: "The United States deplores the assassination on November 10 of Mr. Nadarajah Raviraj, member of the Sri Lankan parliament. We express our deepest sympathy for this loss to the family of Mr. Raviraj, to his parliamentary colleagues, and to the people of Sri Lanka, who have been unjustly robbed of his energy and talent. It is critical that crimes such as the murder of Nadarajah Raviraj not go unpunished. We urge the government to begin an immediate investigation into the circumstances of his killing and to find, arrest, and prosecute those responsible on the most urgent basis."

¶11. (C) Comment: President Rajapaksa's statement gives some reason to hope that Raviraj's murder will serve as a wake-up call to the GSL. Most observers believe that elements of the security forces have played with fire by using dissident Tamil paramilitaries, including the "Karuna group," as proxies in their no-holds-barred struggle with the LTTE. In the case of Raviraj's assassination, many simply cannot accept that security forces had no prior knowledge of an attack carried out so brazenly in front of a military compound. Even more troubling is the context in which the murder occurred: a series of accidental civilian deaths through recent GSL military actions such as the bombing of the de facto Tiger capital Kilinochchi and the shelling of a displaced persons camp in Vakarai. Just two weeks after the failure of a negotiating round in Geneva, it is becoming increasingly difficult to envision a scenario in which the LTTE -- an efficient, brutal and unforgiving terrorist organization -- will not attempt to retaliate against Sinhalese in the south.

BLAKE